

***The
Fifth
Reindeer***

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The Fifth Reindeer

This is a story of long, long ago...so long ago, in fact, that Christmas as a holiday hadn't been around very long. At this time, people still lived in villages. They chopped their own firewood in the nearby woods and dragged it to their homes, where they burned it in their fireplaces to keep their homes warm through the long, cold winter nights. As they watched the snow fall, they wondered if the food they had stored, grown in their fields over the summer, would last.

Everyone in the families worked every day of the year. Some of the men would raise crops in the fields and hunt or fish for food. Others would work in the villages. The women would spin yarn and make clothes, prepare food, haul and split wood, and raise the children. And the children, except the very youngest, had their jobs, too: gathering eggs, fetching water and kindling, and watching over the youngest ones.

During the long dark nights of winter, the oldest of the children would amuse the youngest by telling them stories. Many of these stories had been told to the oldest children by their mothers or grandmothers. And some of the stories were begun by these older children after looking out at the woods or looking up at the night sky. Once the stories were started and told to younger children, the stories continued through the years, as the children retold them to their own children and grandchildren.

It was during this time that Santa Claus began his work. And while this could have been the story of how Santa Claus built his home, or how he came to know Mrs. Claus, or how his beard got to be so white or his boots so black, it's not that story. By the time this story starts, Santa had begun his work in the far north country. In those early years, he only had a small number of elves -- a few dozen or so of the little snow people of the north -- helping him make toys. But they were enough, because there weren't as many children in those days.

At that time, too, Santa's reindeer team was a little bit different from the team we know today. Santa's team was:

Courage	Dasher
Prancer	Vixen
Dancer	Cupid
Donder	Blitzen

Courage was the name of Santa's lead reindeer, and even though she was Santa's favorite, none of the other reindeer minded. She seemed to know the magical old man's mind better than anyone, and had guided the team valiantly through many a vicious storm to ensure that every deserving child received what he or she wanted at Christmas. Her name became her: she was courageous and steadfast as though she were magical -- and indeed, in some ways, she was, as were all of Santa's reindeer. And even though this winter looked as though it might be very harsh -- the bears had gone to their caves early, and the squirrels had stored many extra acorns -- Santa and his reindeer weren't worried. After all, they had Courage to lead them.

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The first snows swirled through the villages early in October. Men and women looked up at the sky, and worry was in their hearts: would there be enough food? Would the animals be all right? They hurried to their churches and lit extra candles, praying that the winter wouldn't be too severe.

It was in the middle of October, during one of the storms sending relentless sheets of snow, that a shudder went through the workshops, barns and homes at Santa's compound. Courage had fallen very ill! One day, when Santa went to the reindeer stalls to feed his beloved team, he noticed that Courage didn't come to her stall door. Peering in, he saw her shivering in a corner, unable to lift her head. Santa rushed into the stall and cradled Courage's head in his arms, speaking softly to her. He tried to feed her some oats, without success. Then he got a blanket and put it over her. He fed the rest of his team, but his face was anxious, and he hardly saw them as he stroked their noses.

Three long days passed. Santa turned over the toy operations to his chief elf, but without Santa's expert assistance, the toys were made more slowly. Santa and Mrs. Claus took turns trying to nurse Courage back to health. And while Santa possessed certain kinds of magic, these did not work against the fires of fever that burned inside his prized companion.

Then, very late on the dark and cold third night of her illness, Courage died.

For a very long while, Santa sat on the straw in Courage's stall, her head still in his arms. Everyone left him alone. At last, he stood, called his chief elf and Mrs. Claus, and said in a quiet but firm voice:

"We will make no toys tomorrow. We will do nothing else until we take Courage to her resting place."

And so, for the first time in more years than anyone could remember, the shops and workhouses of the compound were silent. The great October storm dwindled to a gentle snow, and it was through this snow that the procession of reindeer and elves moved, led by Mrs. Claus and Santa pulling the bier on which Courage's body lay, heading toward a final secret resting place deep in the forest.

Afterwards, when everyone had returned home, Santa sat down in his big chair and looked out the window at the falling snow for a very long time. Mrs. Claus made him a cup of hot cocoa. She quietly placed it on the table by his elbow; but just as she was tiptoeing out of the room, the old man stirred and said:

"I must go off in search of another reindeer."

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She turned, surprised, and said, "But how will we finish the toys in time? Already these past few days, things have slowed down without your direction and help. And," she added very gently, "we couldn't work today."

"But the other seven reindeer can't pull the sleigh themselves. Courage was the strongest, and even with her help, there were times when we barely got off the ground. It's no use. If there's to be Christmas at all this year, I must find a replacement!"

"And if the work falls behind, there won't be enough toys for all the children. And this is a difficult year. What will you do then?"

Santa didn't answer. But his face grew more anxious. He got up, left the room, and returned a few minutes later. Gone were his jolly red jacket, fur-trimmed red leggings, and black boots and belt. Instead, he wore shabby old beggar's clothing. "Tell the chief elf to keep them all working as fast as they can," he said: "I'll be back as soon as possible."

And out he stepped into the frigid night, leaving Mrs. Claus alone in a room with a cup full of cooling cocoa.

For many days, Santa traversed the northern lands, searching for a suitable replacement reindeer. No doubt during that time, he brooded on what Mrs. Claus had said. But he had to be careful to choose a replacement that was exactly right. And so he visited many farms. He had many doors shut in his face when the people within saw his shabby clothes: after all, things were difficult enough as it was, without having to feed and shelter a beggar, even for one night. And of those who did open their doors to him, and who did have reindeer, he sadly shook his head: none he had seen were what he'd hoped to find.

Finally, he stopped at a very tumbledown little house next to an equally tumbledown barn, and after knocking for a very long time at the front door (and worrying all the while that it would fall in), Santa was relieved to hear shuffling footsteps and the sound of a bolt shot back. The door wrenched open, and suddenly Santa thought he was looking at himself in a mirror: the old man facing him looked and was dressed as shabbily as was he.

"What may I do for you?" the old farmer asked.

"I'm looking for a reindeer to replace the one from my team," said Santa.

The old farmer looked at him for a bit, then said, "I have only three reindeer. Two of them I need for my plow; but I could spare the third. But come in first, and share a cup of broth with me, and then we'll go to the barn."

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After the hot broth, the two men went to the falling-in barn. Inside, the farmer stopped to pat the noses of two of the reindeer, who were placidly chewing on bits of hay, before leading Santa to a stall at the far end of the barn. From that stall came the sound of hooves hammering the stall sides.

The first glimpse Santa had of what would become the newest member of his team was that of an eye wildly staring out from the darkness of the stall; then it whirled away, and the kicking resumed.

After the old farmer spoke to the great beast for a while, the drumming stopped, and a large antlered head thrust itself through the stall door. The farmer grabbed a handful of oats from a feedbag hanging on the back wall and offered it to the great mouth; but it was refused.

"You see, I can do nothing with this one," the farmer sighed. "I found him injured under a fallen log: the largest reindeer I'd ever seen. When I'd freed him, the only reason he didn't spring up and run away was because his leg was hurt. So I struggled back here with him, and here he's been ever since. He will not take the food from my hand, as you see: I have to spill the oats on the floor and find them gone when I come back later. I can't take him out except on a very strong lead, which he fights. I don't know why I keep him. I suppose sooner or later he'll kick apart this old barn and take the other two reindeer with him when he leaves..."

The farmer's voice trailed off, because by this time it was clear that Santa was no longer listening. His eyes fixed on the giant beast, he said, "I'll take this one." Reaching into the fold of his cloak, he pulled out a small leather bag. "I have only a little gold," he said.

"Gold is in the land, not in somebody's pocket," the farmer said. "I'll take one gold piece to use in the spring for a new harness and seed. When you come in to better weather, you may pay me what you think he's worth."

And so it was done. Santa gave the farmer a single gold piece, and the farmer handed the heavy reins to Santa, undid the latch on the stall door, and then opened the door and stepped way back, fully expecting the great beast to kick and snort its way out of the barn. But whether it was the magic in Santa's voice, or the gentleness in his touch, or some other unexplained reason, the giant reindeer calmed down and allowed itself to be led outside.

As Santa and the farmer were saying goodbye, the clouds parted, and a shooting star passed through the sky and disappeared. "I take that as a sign," Santa said to the farmer. Turning to the reindeer, he added:

"On the sign of the shooting star I name you

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Comet.

As the newest member of my team, may you learn to fly with the wind and as high as the stars, and may you be granted courage equal to the beloved whom you will replace."

The animal snorted and pawed the earth, its hot breath steaming in the night air. Then, remembering the farmer's kindness, Santa said to the old man:

"Bless this house, this barn, and these lands; and peace and prosperity reign over the lands and those who dwell here."

Then he left, and man and beast disappeared into the night, leaving the farmer to wonder what magic had really visited him that evening.

It took several days for Santa and Comet to reach Santa's compound, partly because snowy weather delayed them, and partly because Comet stubbornly tried several times to go back the way they had come. He still walked with a limp, a reminder of the injury he'd suffered earlier that season. But that didn't stop him from resisting Santa's pull to the north.

At the end of their long journey, late in the afternoon, they were greeted by the reindeer, the elves, and Mrs. Claus, who had all tumbled out of the house, workshops and barn to greet Santa and his new arrival. The other reindeer rushed up to sniff at Comet, who stepped back a bit, understandably unsure about himself in his new surroundings. Now, even though Comet was the largest reindeer the old farmer had ever seen, he was actually somewhat small compared to Santa's other reindeer. When he stepped away from them, they all noticed his limp. They began to talk quietly among themselves.

"Hmph!" snorted Dasher. "Gone for so many days, and this is what he comes back with!"

"As if we could ever replace Courage," murmured Vixen, pawing the ground with her hoof.

"Look at that limp," said Prancer. "He'll barely be able to help pull the sleigh while it's on the ground. I sure hope he'll do better when he flies!"

"And how tiny he is!" said Dancer.

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All of them laughed quietly as Comet stood to one side, glowering and unsure, his pride shaken -- all except Cupid. She took a couple of steps in Comet's direction, looked into his eyes, and said, "He may not replace Courage, but he'll do what's needed -- you'll see."

Meanwhile, the chief elf had bad news for Santa. "It's now the first week in November," he said: "Since you've been gone, we've done the best we could, but the work has been slow. Now that you've brought the new one in, let's stable him. With your help, and with a little bit of luck, we may still be able to"

"But we have to teach Comet how to fly," Santa interrupted.

"What?!" the chief elf squawked. "He can't fly?"

The words passed through the little group like a lightning bolt: "Can't fly! What good is a flying reindeer who can't fly?" they all muttered. "He might as well have brought back nothing at all!" And they said many more things like this, creating quite a noise, until Santa, tired as he was, finally roared:

"That's right! That's right! He can't fly! And neither could any of you, when I found you! Courage and I taught you! And none of you elves knew how to make toys, either! I taught you!...And I'll teach this one to fly, too!"

After the blankets of snow had captured Santa's last words, silence settled over the yard, until Santa finally said, "Mrs. Claus! I need a whole pot of hot cocoa tonight, which I will drink after I put Comet in his new home. As for the rest of you, go back home! We'll start again tomorrow morning!" So saying, Santa trudged to the barn and introduced Comet to his stall, between Cupid's and Dancer's -- Courage's old stall, in fact. "You'll need courage, too, friend," he muttered, before latching the stall door and stumping through the barn and up to his house.

If October was unkind, November was more so. Blizzard after blizzard raged over the land, lashing the villages with great bursts of stinging snow, testing the strength of human as well as animal. Each day, men, women, and children struggled through the heavy drifts, leaning into the howling winds, to gather wood for the fires, to tend the cows, to gather the eggs. And slowly, steadily, like the certain advance of a glacier, all of the people in all of the villages began to say to each other, "If we can just make it to Christmas!" And even though winter would be far from over by that time, it was as though Christmas, the celebration of the great holiday, would give everyone the strength to look beyond this horrible winter to the promise of spring.

Far in the north, Santa was having his problems, too: Comet was proving to be a difficult student. The wildness about which the farmer had warned Santa showed itself in a tendency to leap instead of fly, to go in the wrong direction, to tumble into

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snowdrifts, to slam into fir trees. It was a wonder that neither man nor beast was injured. Yet a bond seemed to grow between the two of them: Comet stopped trying to escape at every opportunity, and even appeared at times to be paying attention to what Santa was saying.

But while things improved in the air, things remained very hard in the stalls. The other reindeer were well aware that each day Santa spent teaching Comet meant a day spent away from the workshops. This meant that toy production was falling further and further behind. And the reindeer didn't hesitate to discuss this, in a way that Comet was sure to overhear: "He can't fly at all: he just jumps and falls!" "How hard can it be, learning to fly? Doesn't he have any sense at all?" "Doesn't he realize that Santa needs more than ever to be in the workshop, not teaching some slow learner how to stay up in the air?" "What'll he do when he has to do flying drills with the rest of us?" "I sure hope he's not hitched next to me!" "Nor to me!"

There was much more talk like this, which Comet endured in silence. Sometimes, after difficult sessions or when landings had been particularly hard, his weak leg would hurt so much that he could scarcely stand and force down his oats.

Only Cupid refused to join with the other reindeer in their stall talk. And one very hard night, when Comet didn't even look at his oats but only stood, his breath coming in rasping sobs, she muttered to herself, "This won't do at all!" and, leaning her head over the wall they shared, she said, "The last thing you want to do on a cold winter's night is forget to eat your oats!...I remember how hard it was for me to learn how to fly, and I didn't have a hurt leg to worry about...I don't know about the others, but I think you'll do just fine."

It was as though these words carried a magical charge. Comet lifted his head, and his breath came easier. Eventually, he was able to eat.

Thereafter, things seemed to improve. Comet made steady progress; and, after only a few more days, he was flying in great swinging arcs across the sky. The only difficulty that remained was his landing: still favoring his hurt leg, he often tumbled head over heels into a snowdrift.

Finally, Comet's skills had improved to the point where Santa decided no more lessons were required. From this point forward, there would only be the daily drills in the practice pasture with the team, right up until Christmas Eve.

However, if Santa felt any relief, it was short-lived: on the way to the feed shed, he was confronted by a grim-faced chief elf. "We are now hopelessly behind in our work," he said. "Even with your help now, day and night, we couldn't possibly make all the toys that are required." He followed Santa as the old man took the bags of oats into the reindeer barn: "We might have had a chance, if you hadn't had to spend so much

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time teaching that one how to fly. It's the first week in December! And what kind of Christmas will it be now, without enough toys to go around?" He gave the old man no rest, but moved from stall to stall with him, not worrying that the reindeer heard every word; after all, he was only voicing what everyone already knew: "So what will we do, then? Give toys to some of the children who deserve them, and refuse others who deserve them as much? Some Christmas!"

"What would you have me do, then?" Santa asked in exasperation: "not fly at all? Then no child would have Christmas toys!"

"Maybe it would be better that way," the chief elf said bitterly, watching Santa empty oats into Comet's feed trough. "Better to deny everyone than to give unfairly. All I know is, we can't possibly make all the toys in time...not without outside help, which looks impossible at this stage!"

Santa didn't answer: he only chewed his knuckle as he watched his beloved animals eat.

Later that night, his untouched cocoa at his elbow, Santa brooded on the situation, staring out the window. It was a rare clear night; thousands of stars hung in the night sky, and a full moon was riding up from the trees. "This is a terrible choice," he muttered, "and not all my magic can keep me from having to make it! Do I set some children against others, or do I disappoint all the children? What must I do?"

Just then, the old man thought he saw a bright starry object flash across the heavens. "If that was truly a shooting star," he whispered, "let me wish upon it that I make the right choice, or that -- or that, through some miracle, we received the help we need." He stared out the window long after the flashing light had faded away.

Santa wasn't the only in the compound who was spending a sleepless night. In the reindeer barn, all the reindeer were asleep except one. Comet too brooded over the words he'd heard that day, coupled with many similar words he'd heard over many previous days. Finally, he could stand it no longer: while the other reindeer slept, he pushed carefully against the door of his stall. To his surprise, it opened! Slowly, holding his breath, he slipped through the door and down the passageway. Behind him, only Cupid stirred, sensing his passage. "Where are you going?" she whispered sleepily, but he didn't answer. Gaining the entrance, he pushed quietly outside, paused for a moment on the starswept white meadow, took a deep breath, and leaped into the night.

At first, he flew here and there, with no clear purpose except a vague idea of trying to get the help Santa needed -- but from where, and who it would be, he had no idea at all. Gradually, his arcs grew wider and wider, until they were giant swings across the night sky, urged on by a desperate sense that it was all his fault, and that

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only he could make things right again. He flew farther and farther, getting more and more tired, and feeling more and more a sense of despair. Finally, just as he was about to give up, he spied a light flickering ahead of him in the distant hills. With the last of his strength, he made for the light.

It turned out to be the flickering light of a fire in the snow. As he landed, Comet looked about for some sign of life, but found none. Though the fire gave off a welcome heat, Comet knew he couldn't stay long. After resting for a few minutes, he prepared to take off again. At that moment, an old woman dressed in rags moved into the firelight. Whether she had been standing all this time outside the circle of fire, or whether she had mysteriously appeared from somewhere else, it was impossible to say.

"Hello, Comet," she said, and he took a quick step back. "Ahh, cautious, are we? That's good, that's good. You must be wondering who I am and how it is that I know your name."

Comet stamped and shook his head.

"Not speaking, then? Oh, that's right. Of course. And Santa was too busy teaching you to fly. And of course the others wouldn't tell you. Let me see what I can teach you:

"First, I am a Power in these hills. That's all you really need to know. Second, the other reindeer can speak, and you can't. Not yet. Not even Santa can help you there. You must earn your privilege of speech, by doing a deed worthy of it. All the others passed their tests. Ask Dasher about rescuing the snow people. And Cupid about the drowning sailors. Ask -- But how silly of me: you can't ask anyone anything, unless you do what's required.

"And that brings us to the third point: You want to help Santa out of his trouble, correct? Patience, patience!" -- for Comet was stamping fiercely and snorting. "This is what you must do...

"You have been christened on a shooting star and given the name Comet on purpose," the old woman stated, "for you will become the greatest flier of all the reindeer. And you will need every bit of your skill. For the help Santa needs lies far away...up there!" She gestured to the stars. "You must fly up and up, much farther than any other creature before you. You must fly into the blue vault of the heavens, beyond the highest earthbound peaks. In the reaches of the heavens, where the air is cold and thin, you will find a starlike people. Those are the people who will help Santa. Some of them will follow you back to the earth.

"You are the only creature who will be able to do this, for I will give you magic that lets you fly into the most remote skies. Even so, you will be hard pressed. For you must make your journey and return with the Star People this very night, before the full

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moon sets behind the hills. Only then, if you meet this task, will you receive your new voice.

"And this I further state: Because you are receiving this great gift of special flight, you must make this journey every year. For the men and women multiply upon the earth, and the children of the world increase. Therefore, more Star People will be needed each year to provide Santa the help he needs. Succeed, and Christmas continues. Fail --"

Comet bowed his head.

"You're tired, I see," she said gently. "Here, then, drink this!" And she brought a steaming pail into the light circle.

Greedily, Comet drank. Each swallow seemed to send fire to every limb and through his entire being. He bellowed and tossed his head.

"Receive the magic!" the old woman shouted. "And now fly beyond the clouds, with the stars as your companions!"

But her voice had already dwindled to a speck of sound, for Comet had hurled himself far into the night. On and on he flew, faster and further than any other creature, beyond the peaks, beyond the clouds, high into the cold blue vault of the heavens. His great heart throbbed: he must not fail.

In the predawn light, the workshops, barns and homes at Santa's compound were in an uproar. Comet had disappeared! The chief elf bellowed his rage. The reindeer and other elves talked furiously among themselves. Even Mrs. Claus shook her head. After all this time, and despite all of the effort Santa had put forth, to betray him so! Surely now, Christmas was ruined! Best that that horrible creature never set hoof on these grounds again!

This and many more angry things did they all say -- all except Santa and Cupid. Santa stood to one side, deep in disturbed thought, watching without really seeing the full moon as it touched the hills on the horizon. Had he misjudged this great beast after all? Was it really the wayward creature he had seen at first?

Cupid approached the great old man and said, "I can't believe that he would just leave. He must be trying to do something for us --" her voice trembled, betraying her troubled spirit "--only, I --wish we could know what it is. He must be out there, somewhere, trying to do something to help us!" And she turned her eyes from the moon that had sunk halfway behind the hills and looked up to the far reaches of the night sky.

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Following her gaze, Santa too looked upward. Then, whether through instinct or some even subtler sense, the rest of them did the same. And what they then saw was simply incredible: tiny points of light, hundreds and hundreds of them, growing brighter and larger, streaming towards the earth -- an incredible, dazzling shower of stars, lighting up field and meadow, hill and valley with a brightness as of day. And in the midst of the shower, wheeling and tumbling in free fall, the last of his strength leaving him, Comet, greatest of fliers, plunged to the earth, landing in a crash and shower of snow, while all around him landed the stars become people, as the last light of the moon winked out beyond the hills.

From under the snow a sobbing came, as the great beast, utterly spent, struggled to regain his breath. Cupid leaped forward, brushing snow off him with her nose, her soft breath warming him.

At last, he was able to stand, though unsteadily. Then he limped forward, his leg throbbing. He looked first at the hundreds of Star People, next at Santa. Then he opened his mouth carefully, unsure of himself, and haltingly, hoarsely and shyly he stuttered, "They're -- for you. They will -- help -- make -- the toys."

Then everyone cheered, and the chief elf jumped forward and threw his arms around Comet's neck. Santa laughed and laughed. There was great joy, celebration, and dancing, and Mrs. Claus made more hot cocoa than the thought she could make: Christmas was saved!

After the celebration had been going on for a while, Santa walked up to Comet and said, "Greatest of fliers, to you we owe this Christmas in this most difficult of winters. Therefore I ask you to choose whether you will lead the team, and who will fly next to you."

"Lead, yes, lead!" the other reindeer shouted. They had all forgotten their earlier anger now.

But Comet said, "I will not lead. It was Courage who led, with Dasher at her side. Therefore Dasher should lead, and Dancer -- Courage's stallmate -- should fly beside him."

"And to fly beside you?" Santa urged.

"Me!" shouted Prancer.

"Me!" shouted Donder. "No, me!" shouted Blitzen.

Indeed, they all took turns clamoring in front of the great flier. Only Cupid stood shyly to one side.

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Comet looked at them all for a long moment, then said quietly, "Dancer has moved up beside Dasher. The newest reindeer should accept with honor the open spot on the team. I would be honored if Cupid would accept flying beside me. I will gladly be the fifth reindeer on the team."

Cupid accepted happily. And so Santa's team became:

Dasher	Dancer
Prancer	Vixen
Comet	Cupid
Donder	Blitzen

With the help of the Star People, all the necessary toys were made in the remaining weeks, and that Christmas was one of the best ever, coming as it did in so harsh a year.

Thereafter, Comet, the Fifth Reindeer, became an everlasting member of Santa's famous team. And though he was known as the best flier among the reindeer, his leg always remained a bit lame and sore, and he needed to rely on Cupid for all landings.

And the journey of the Fifth Reindeer can be seen even today: for when people look up in the night sky and see a shower of shooting stars, they know that Comet is leading more Star People to earth to help bring Christmas to the children of the world.

One final note: the old farmer, who sold Comet to Santa, enjoyed incredible and unexpected prosperity to the end of his days, and his descendants have become among the wealthiest farmers in the region.